Outrageous Requests to Concierges

By Jim Ferri

If you think most concierges spend their workday just sourcing hard-to-find tickets for concerts or the ballet, think again.

For top concierges, many of whom are in the employ of the world’s top luxury hotels (whose guests will pay handsomely for any whim), no task is impossible. Then again, the job can have its challenges.

Consider Frank Laino, the Executive Head Concierge at The Stafford London on St James’s Place in London. Six years ago Laino was named “Best Concierge in the World” by the luxury travel-agency network Virtuoso and it’s not difficult to understand why.

Several years ago a doctor from Hawaii, a guest at the hotel, approached Laino with a unique request: to see a painting by Vermeer, the masterpiece The Music Lesson.

Most scholars agree that only thirty-five or thirty-six works by Vermeer exist today and the doctor, on a lifelong quest to see them all, had seen all but two, one of which was The Music Lesson. There was only one hitch – the painting hung in Buckingham Palace in the private collection of the Queen, not in any area open to the public.

It took several weeks of networking and required a security clearance for the guest but Laino was able to get him into the palace for a private 15-minute viewing. “It was one of most satisfying things I’ve ever done,” says Laino.

Another time a guest asked him for a bespoke Savile Row suit for her small dog. Laino made a call and was able to arrange a fitting by a tailor at the hotel for two suits, one a Harris Tweed, the other plain burgundy. The client was very happy despite the cost for each suit being approximately ￡3,000.

On the other side of the world at The Westin Bund Center Shanghai, one guest wanted to surprise his girlfriend with a marriage proposal in his hotel room. He asked Chief Concierge Ken Xie to arrange 999 red roses in their room and to totally cover the bed with petals upon their arrival. Xie also had to hide two violinists in the room to play romantic music at the moment of the proposal and have their favorite songs playing in the bathroom.

Just a few months ago in Germany, Mexican guests at the Hotel Adlon Kempinski Berlin asked Concierge André Höftmann for contact information for several public authorities. It became apparent to Höftmann they were doing some research and he asked if he might help. The woman told him that for years she was searching for the birth certificate of her mother who was born in Berlin in 1923 and then immigrated to Mexico as a child. It was an extremely difficult search, which was not fruitful, but Höftmann and his staff persisted even after the guests had left. He finally located the certificate and sent it to Mexico, where it recently arrived on the woman’s birthday.

Ian Haigh, Concierge at Dukes Hotel London, remembers an American guest who asked for an onion ring the size of his head. “He literally wanted the biggest onion ring we could find,” says Haigh, “so I spoke to a couple of steakhouses and arranged for them to make some. We had them ready for when he and his family arrived."

The Dukes staff also remembers the female guest who required all-white foods. Not just white bread on sandwiches and white sugar instead of brown, literally everything had to be the color white.

Many odd requests made to concierges seem to relate to animals. At the Dolder Grand in Zurich, Switzerland, a Russian guest wanted his dog’s crate to have a real lawn so he’d feel more comfortable. The hotel’s Concierge arranged for a customized lawn so that the dog could enjoy the comfort of a five-star dog crate.

At the Principe di Savoia in Milan a guest requested a private helicopter to take her dog to see the Alps.

A guest at the Beverly Hills Hotel, who was breeding her show dog, had the concierge arrange an actual wedding for the two dogs, complete with a minister, catering, outfits, etc. They were married in the hotel’s Crystal Ballroom (she wore traditional white) and honeymooned in one of the hotel’s garden suites, Bungalow 14, at a total cost of $15,000. Another guest at the Beverly Hills once requested that the staff speak "dog language" to his dog since he didn't like them to speak to it in English.

In Paris, one of the most outrageous guests at the Hotel Le Meurice was the surrealist painter Salvador Dalí, who spent at least one month per year at the hotel. He once he demanded from the concierge that a herd of sheep be brought to his room, and upon their arrival, Dalí took out his pistol and shot at them. Luckily, the gun was filled with blanks.

Another time, he requested a horse from Le Meurice’s concierge. Still another, he asked the staff to capture flies for him in the Tuileries Garden, paying them five francs (around one euro) per fly. And on a moment’s notice The Stafford’s Laino once had to find a place where a specially trained horse would allow a woman from California to do Tai Chi on horseback.

Some requests involve considerable travel. Concierge Claude Chaffarod of Le Richemond in Geneva, Switzerland, still remembers the morning he arrived at work and a client asked him to go to Los Angeles to get a costume for her son. Chaffarod left for California and was back at the hotel within 24 hours.

Some requests, however, just can’t be fulfilled. At the Plaza on the River hotel in London a hen group, after finishing an in-suite sushi masterclass at the hotel, asked if the hotel could find a naked man to act as their sushi platter. Last year (when both the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee and the Olympics were taking place in London) a young female guest requested the concierge of the Park Plaza County Hall hotel to make arrangements for her to skydive into central London, preferably Trafalgar Square. It was also rejected.

Even Frank Laino of The Stafford can’t fulfill every entreaty.

A very sincere Middle-Eastern client once requested that Laino propose marriage to his daughter and he had to explain he was unable to fulfill his request.

“I doubted my wife would have approved,” says Laino.